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BELMAS 2015 CONFERENCE - ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

'What Role Leaders in Socially Just School Systems?'

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Introduction

At a global level, increasing emphasis has been placed on both leadership and social justice within educational theory, policy and practice. The growing international interest into the investigation of social justice leadership lends itself very well to the conference theme of *Democracy: Time for Renewal or retreat in Educational Leadership*. Headteachers are being held to account for socially just school practices but schools are located within unjust local, national and international contexts. This roundtable takes as its focus a discussion of the kinds of influence that school leaders are expected to have, versus the kinds of influence that they are able to have.

The discussion draws from a number of research projects exploring research, policy and practice to investigate 'social justice leadership' in education. Discussion includes the educational policy discourses around social justice, education and leadership (Angelle *et al*, 2015; Forde 2014a, 2014b); analysis of systems-level data to identify issues around equity and outcomes and finally the construction and enactment of social justice leadership in practice. Key background information and data are provided from three contrasting education systems - Scotland, England and New Zealand - to stimulate discussion as to the extent to which policy rhetoric and practice realities are aligned in countries where different approaches are evident. In so doing, tensions in the expectations placed upon school leaders are discussed to explore the extent to which headteachers can be held to account for socially just school practices.

In what ways does the rhetoric of professional standards and national school policies call headteachers to account for leading socially just school systems?

Many countries have developed sets of national values as promoted in Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Perspectives from England

In England, school performance measures are used as policy drivers for equitability in academic outcomes; schools are expected to close the gap between achievement of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds and other pupils. Additional money is given to the school for each pupil deemed to be 'poor.' It is known as Pupil Premium for pupils in receipt of 'free schools meals' and schools should use this money to support children from low-income families to make the same academic progress as their non-pupil premium peers. The rhetoric of social mobility is the reason given for these policy drivers. School curriculums are also driven by government through the metrics used for the performance of schools, in that certain academic subjects are valued over others. The English Baccalaureate is a narrow curriculum of 'entitlement' that holds headteachers to account for ensuring all pupils, regardless of background, are prepared equally for adult life. Thus, social injustice is prevented because all are entitled to perform well in a rigorous curriculum provision.

Perspectives from Scotland

Since the early 1990s, there have been several public articulations of values in Scottish education particularly around issues of inclusion, equality and fairness (Forde and Morley, 2015; Torrance and Forde, 2015; Torrance *et al.*, 2015). Social justice formed a cornerstone of the re-established Scottish Parliament in 1999. This marked the start of a consistent thread in public policy in a devolved Scotland, that recognised both the increasingly diverse and pluralist nature of Scottish society, and the experience of exclusion and marginalization particularly by those in poor communities (SE, 1999; Iannelli and Paterson, 2005). A clear legislative framework developed, complementing wider UK legislation (Equality Act, 2010). Discourse around values became prominent. Over many years, the school inspectorate quality assurance documents and national curriculum guidelines have made specific reference to issues of equality and inclusion (Torrance *et al.*, 2015). Policy rhetoric places responsibility squarely with headteachers to ensure socially just practices within their schools.

Perspectives from New Zealand

Couched in the discourses of biculturalism and inclusion, New Zealand school principals have a professional and legislative responsibility (Education Act, 1989; Ministry of Education, 2004, 2008, 2013) to promote learning environments that ensure equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealanders, uphold the principles of participation, protection and partnership enshrined in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, acknowledge and respect cultural diversity, and lift the educational achievement of 'priority learners' from Maori and Pacific, and low socioeconomic backgrounds (ERO, 2012; Prime Minister, 2012). Equity "through fairness and social justice" is

the fourth of seven values to be “encouraged, modelled and explored” in the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 10), yet a national articulation of what constitutes equity or fairness has yet to be formulated. Each principal, with the Board of Trustees, must consequently determine how best to enact culturally responsive and socially just leadership practices.

Given the reality of national data, to what extent can individual headteachers be called to account to lead socially just schools?

Tensions are often encountered when seeking to address the global travelling theme of leadership for social justice.

Perspectives from England

If socially just schools are about all having equal opportunity to achieve, there is a tension between the government rhetoric of using selective performance data to measure social justice and the resources available to close the gap of achievement in schools. Headteachers are called to account for the extent to which they enable social mobility through equal academic outcomes; however, the extent to which they are supported to realise social justice is a contested point. The marketisation of the school landscape in England (Ball, 2008) and language of corporatisation (Gunter 2012) expects individual headteachers to ensure the business of their own school succeeds, and where they are successful they are encouraged to ‘take over’ other less successful ‘businesses.’ The aim is to improve educational outcomes in all schools. Thus, a socially just system is achieved through a cadre of high performing individual headteachers leading the system.

Perspectives from Scotland

Despite the Scottish policy rhetoric, headteachers often work within significant constraints in schools located within unjust local, national and international contexts (Torrance and Forde, 2015). The *Christie Commission* (2011), in connecting equity, power, rights and social justice, identified that public services had much to do to ensure better outcomes and make the principles of human rights a reality for many people living in Scotland (Davis *et al.*, 2014, p. 5). The economic and social disparity between the advantaged and disadvantaged in Scotland, suggests that the public discourse around social justice is part of Scottish mythology. Much still needs to be done in order for Scotland to claim that it represents a socially just society. Headteachers leading for social justice need societal and system-wide support in order for their influence to have maximum effect. Only then can headteachers in Scotland be held to account to lead socially just schools.

Perspectives from New Zealand

New Zealand has a high quality, low equity education system (May, Cowles, and Lamy, 2013). While the most able students continue to perform above the OECD average, a comparatively larger proportion struggle to complete basic reading, maths and science reading tasks. The 'long (and brown) tail' of underachievement is most evident in the lowest decile (SES) secondary schools, where many students enter Year 9 at a curriculum level four years below their peers in higher decile schools (Woulfe, 2014). Despite growing income disparity and increasing child poverty rates during the late 20th/early 21st centuries (Boston, 2013), discourses of falling standards, deficient teacher professionalism, and inadequate school leadership appear to hold greater weight in explaining educational disparity than those of power and privilege (including colonisation, intellectual, and/or material impoverishment). Compensatory funding mechanisms do little to level the playing field between rich and poor schools, and a commitment to social justice often requires the allocation of already meagre funding to the provision of basic necessities such as food, clothing and study equipment.

In what ways are the concepts of social justice leadership and democratic leadership complimentary and contradictory?

Internationally, many countries have witnessed significant changes to the role of the headteacher aligned to a shift towards the devolved governance of schools.

Perspectives from England

The 'neo-liberalising' (Ball, 2012) of the public sector and education in England has increased the workloads of school leaders and the intensification of responsibility and accountability has led to a need to distribute leadership within schools (Gronn, 2003). This may well lead to a greater democratising in many schools as a result of sharing, distributing leadership. This can seem like an empowering direction-of-travel that supports social justice. Alternatively, the competition engendered by the market influences that are gaining traction in the school system can result in greater hierarchies. The hierarchy of schools across the public funded system becomes more overt and consequently leads to contradictions in how democratic things can be. Some in England welcome a less democratic school system because the enabling of the highest performing headteachers, leading the whole system, is how they argue social justice is best achieved. The benevolent dictators ensure the democratic voice of vested interest does not dominate!

Perspectives from Scotland

In Scotland, the headteacher role became the preoccupation of those charged with strategically targeting school improvement efforts constituting, '*a major national policy priority of governments*' (Davidson et al., 2008: 68). As part of those policy expectations, a set of core Professional Values and Personal Commitment including a detailed articulation of social justice for education is made explicit within the revised *Standard for Headship* (GTCS, 2012). In this way, headteachers become drivers for societal change, working with teachers to address issues that limit the educational and life opportunities of pupils. Such policy positioning promotes democratic values residing at the heart of Scottish society. While discussion of professional values has been a core element of headship preparation programmes (Forde, 2014), there is now a question about how social justice is not only understood by leaders (Bogotch, 2008) but also drawn upon to shape practice in schools (Ryan, 2010). Despite the espoused rhetoric, limited research exists and limited attention has been paid to the barriers and challenges faced by social justice leaders (Angelle *et al.*, 2015; Stevenson, 2007).

Perspectives from New Zealand

The rhetoric of democratic ideals often obscures the reality of hegemonic practices that marginalise minority groups and protect white middle class privilege. Within New Zealand's devolved education system, 'choice' is the preserve of those with requisite cultural and material capital. As chief executive officers, principals are expected to be entrepreneurial in establishing and maintaining competitive edge, growing school rolls, and generating income. The practice of democracy in local school communities risks perpetuating the tyranny of the majority, preserving the viability of individual schools at the expense of others at the meso level, and compromising social justice at the macro level. This poses social justice leaders with challenging ethical dilemmas.

What are the implications for headteachers in relation to the kinds of leadership influence they can and should have on school practices?

Social justice leadership is inherently a political process involving headteachers asserting influence on school practices. However, whilst individual headteachers can exercise a values based commitment to social justice in their own practice, and in developing the practice of the schools they lead, the extent of their influence is constrained by the meso and macro levels of the school system and of society as a whole.

Perspectives from England

Headteachers in England can have huge influence on their school practices. They will not keep their job for very long if the performance of their school fails to meet the targets of government. School leaders have little or no influence on the macro determination of the metrics for deciding whether or not they keep their jobs. Thus, the influence of the nation at the meso and micro levels is palpable, although it is the headteacher who authorises how national policy is implemented at the level of the school or family of schools. The kinds of leadership that emerge in the English education landscape vary according to how vulnerable the school is in the context of government-led performance measures. Where a school is less vulnerable the headteacher can exert considerable leadership influence, over a sustained time. For leadership taking on a 'failing' school, the time afforded to influence its 'turnaround' is usually politically driven, and for many leaders the time is too short!

Perspectives from Scotland

The emerging case study data from Scotland highlights that headteachers perceive themselves as activists within their professional roles (Torrance and Forde, 2015). In so doing, they champion social justice in an effort to change mindsets, school cultures and practices. However, what is also emerging is the extent to which the efforts of each headteacher are bounded by the meso school context and local authority governance arrangements, as well as by the macro national context. At the macro layer, the policy positioning of 'social justice' within the revised professional standards (GTCS, 2012), is viewed as supportive of their efforts, providing a mandate to focus the individual and collective efforts of staff. However, the meso layer is experienced as challenging to their practice of leadership for social justice both at local authority and school levels. As their focus moved through the meso layer and into the macro layer, each headteacher was able to exert less and less influence. Concomitantly, macro and meso factors had a profound effect on the challenges faced by pupils and, in turn, by staff and each headteacher.

Perspectives from New Zealand

Like their Scottish counterparts, the New Zealand ISLDN case study principals are committed to an egalitarian vision of state education as a public good. Unlike their Scottish colleagues, New Zealand principals perceive the macro policy environment to be antithetical to their social justice leadership. At the micro level, a strong moral imperative leads many to sacrifice material reward and deliberately seek schooling contexts in which they can exercise greatest agency. While contextual factors at the meso and macro level undoubtedly constrain principals in their work for social justice, there are also enablers. A flexible national curriculum document invites

the development of local curriculum and, in a small highly devolved education system, principals are able to galvanise community support in order to directly challenge authorities such the Ministry of Education and Education Review Office (ERO).

Conclusion

Headteachers have a central and public role in challenging barriers to lead change for social justice. In striving to embed the policy rhetoric of social justice values in school leadership practices, school leaders may experience tensions through conflicting priorities and accountabilities. One of the challenges faced by many education systems beyond raising achievement, is closing the gap between privileged and marginalized groups of pupils. It is vital that school systems guard against interpreting the challenge '*to closing the performance gap on high-stakes standardized tests*', targeting individual pupils for additional work to raise grades in examinations (Wrigley *et al.*, 2012: 201). Such additive short term efforts fail to engage with fundamental changes required in the curriculum, teaching and learning processes and the wider culture that shape the lived experiences of learners in specific contexts.

Headteachers who do strive to make their schools more socially just still inherit their school contexts, located within a wider education system that reproduces inequalities (Gairín and Rodriguez-Gómez, 2014, p. 819). Bogotch and Shields (2014, p. 2) express:

Good people, hardworking people, and well-intentioned people committed to improving schools find themselves in frustrating positions where the only pathways they can see are too often ones prescribed and scripted by others, where educators are not free to create policies and programs which meet the needs of children and communities.

Despite the significant and numerous challenges, social justice leaders maintain their motivation dependent on "the interaction of the political culture and their individual beliefs and values" (Hajisoteriou and Angelides, 2014, p. 901). Such motivation is fuelled, for example, "in seeing that high expectations for all students, in spite of their backgrounds, leads to success" (Norberg, Arlestig and Angelle, 2014, p. 104). While much responsibility rests on the headteacher, their work is set in a particular context that can bring other challenges.

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